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BOSTON GLOBE
8 May 1986

ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 1

Vatican body aided reputed criminals of war, studies say

By Stephen Kurkjian
Globe Staff

WASHINGTON – A Vatican-controlled college in Rome provided sanctuary to numerous alleged war criminals shortly after World War II and helped them gain safe passage to Argentina and other countries, according to recently declassified US Army Counter Intelligence Corps documents.

The documents, which were written shortly after the war, state that the Allies knew that the suspects, mostly Croatian government officials, were hidden in a complex of buildings that constitute St. Jerome's College, a Roman Catholic seminary for priests.

But in the end, the documents indicate, the Americans decided not to raid the seminary and break up the operation because of fears that a raid would result in [redacted] propaganda.

The reports allege that the operation was headed by Rev. Krunoslav Draganovic, a Croatian Catholic priest who served as secretary of St. Jerome's College, and who has since died. But the documents leave unanswered the question of whether papal advisers or Vatican diplomats had known of or had approved the operation.

Among those protected was Ande Pavelic, head of the Nazi-controlled Croatian government from 1941 to 1945, and considered one of the most prominent purported war criminals ever to escape prosecution. Pavelic was killed in 1959.

Another Croatian government official who escaped through the smuggling network was Interior Minister Andrija Artukovic, who emigrated to the United States in 1948 with a false passport.

Artukovic was extradited from the United States in February and is now on trial in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, on charges that he was directly responsible for 450 civilian deaths during the war.

As many as 500 Croatians a month were able to gain passage out of Italy through the smuggling network, according to the documents. Many of the Croatians either were hidden at St. Jerome's or were provided with falsified identification papers through the college, the documents allege.

"Pavelic's contacts are so high and his present position is so compromising to the Vatican that any extradition of [him] would deal a staggering blow to the Roman Catholic Church," one of the reports states.

Like others in the package of documents, that report urged caution in any attempt to arrest Pavelic.

The reports also reflect debate and shifting loyalties among the Allies in setting policy on how aggressively to pursue suspected Croatian war criminals and whether to extradite the suspects to communist-controlled Yugoslavia, where it was feared that they would be subjected to mock trials and execution.

Pavelic's party, Ustachi, gained control of the provinces in northern and central Yugoslavia soon after war broke out in the Balkans. The party then declared those provinces the independent state of Croatia.

While supposedly a sovereign nation, Croatia was one of the numerous Nazi puppet governments, and its army fought on the Eastern front alongside the Germans.

Among those who served with Croatian officers was Kurt Waldheim, then an officer in the Nazi-controlled Austrian army, who received Croatia's highest military award for his wartime record. Waldheim, the former UN secretary general, is now seeking election as Austria's president, and his campaign has been hampered by protests over his role in the war.

In 1945, near the end of the war, Pavelic fled to the British sector of Austria, where, according to the Army Counter Intelligence records, it was believed that he was hidden by British forces. The documents are not explicit as to why the British would have provided sanctuary to Pavelic.

By 1946, the documents show, Pavelic, disguised in clerical garb, made his way to Italy and St. Jerome's College, where he stayed in several buildings until at least the fall of 1947.

Nothing came of British and American plans to assist Italian officials in a raid on the college.

The reason for the decision not to raid the premises is hinted at in a report written in late August 1947 by three US Army Counter Intelligence officers in Rome.

They stated that they believe that Pavelic had close links to the British, as well as to the Vatican. The agents said they felt the United States should secretly try to persuade the Vatican to expose the British "protection and cooperation" with Pavelic, and in so doing, force the British to arrest him on their own and extradite him back to Yugoslavia.

If that plan failed, the agents said, the Vatican's views should be "appreciated." They also said that "no direct police action" should be taken against Pavelic "on the part of the American military authorities."

By 1948, Pavelic, in possession of a falsified Spanish passport, emigrated to Argentina, where he stayed until he was shot in an assassination attempt in 1959. He sought medical treatment in Spain, and died from his wounds. There are no indications as to who killed him and why.

Efforts by the Globe to contact the Vatican's press office for comment on the Army records were unsuccessful.

However, Joaquin Navarro Valls, chief Vatican spokesman, told the Religious News Service that that the "answer would be in the archives of the Secretariat" of State, the Vatican's foreign relations office, "since it is a question regarding history."

He said, "I don't think anyone working in the Secretariat of State was around then."

The head of St. Jerome's College said in a telephone interview from Rome yesterday that he had no means by which to judge the accuracy of the documents.

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However, a Jesuit scholar based in Rome, who is an expert on postwar Vatican policy making, said that while the records were disturbing, he was not surprised by the disclosures.

"The Vatican was in a very difficult position at the time," the scholar, Rev. Robert Graham, said on Monday. "They knew that by turning these people over to Tito, it would have certainly resulted in their extinction, even though the charges against some of them were not very well defined." Josip Broz Tito, the Yugoslav leader, died in 1980.

But the documents leave little doubt about Pavelic's crimes. During his reign, it is alleged that as many as 800,000 Serbs, gypsies and Jews were killed.

One report described Pavelic as an "international gangster" who had plotted the assassination of King Alexander of Yugoslavia in 1934 as a way of destabilizing the country, and as "an ardent extremist of the worst sort."

Within months of his coming to power in 1941, Pavelic's Croatian nationalists "slaughtered in a few weeks tens of thousands Serbians" who had refused to renounce their Orthodox religion, the report said.

Another scholar of Vatican-Yugoslav relations, who teaches at an Ivy League university, said that the documents allege "the most serious link ever between the Vatican and the Nazis. Pavelic was a known terrorist before he came to power and a brutal head of state."

"It's inconceivable that a case could be made for providing him sanctuary," said the scholar, who insisted that he not be identified further.

Besides Pavelic, according to the Army documents, those given sanctuary in the college were some of the top members of the Ustacha party that controlled Croatia during the war, such as its armed forces chief, the head of its propaganda office, the assistant chief of security, military officers and police chiefs.

The 500 pages of documents were released by the US Army Intelligence and Security Command in Arlington, Va., on the basis of a Freedom of Information Request filed by a Boston lawyer, John J. Loftus, and the Australian Broadcasting Co. They were subsequently made available to the Globe.

Loftus, who formerly worked for the Justice Department in tracking down World War II war criminals in the United States, has been working with the Australian media on a series of broadcasts regarding Nazi collaborators who emigrated to Australia after the war.

Whether Pope Pius XII or members of his inner circle at the Vatican directly or indirectly permitted the smuggling network to operate is not clearly shown by the documents.

One report alleged that St. Jerome's College, one of several institutions in Rome used for the training of non-Italian priests, was the only Catholic college outside of the sovereign Vatican state under the direct control of the Pope.

A summary of Pavelic's background, written in August 1947 by three Army counter intelligence agents, said Pavelic "is known to be in contact with the Vatican which sees in him the militant Catholic who yesterday fought the Orthodox Church and today is fighting Communist atheism."

Another of the documents made public is a note handwritten in Italian. The note alleges that while at St. Jerome's, Pavelic had "frequent contact" with Msgr. Giovanni Battista Montini, the assistant secretary of state for the Vatican who later became Pope Paul VI.

In that position, Msgr. Montini oversaw the operations of the various colleges for non-Italians, including St. Jerome's.

Another document stated that Msgr. Montini was one of several Vatican officials after the war who supported the hopes of the Ustachi and other Catholic groups to overthrow Tito and reestablish an independent state inside Yugoslavia where the church could thrive.

Included in the documents released to Loftus was a cable from the US Embassy in Rome. The cable stated the Vatican's secretariat of state for Pope Pius XII had attested to the good character of several Croatian government officials then being held by the Allies.

The embassy said the secretariat, then the direct responsibility of Msgr. Montini, was urging that the officials not be returned for trial to Yugoslavia.

But Father Graham, the Jesuit scholar, pointed out that it was a historical fact that Msgr. Montini was an ardent opponent of the Mussolini government in Italy and of all forms of fascism. "To accuse him of being involved in the harboring of war criminals is preposterous," Graham said.

How, then, could Pavelic and his Croatian colleagues have gained access to St. Jerome and the falsified documents to escape Allied-occupied Italy?

The documents allege the key figure was Rev. Draganovic, the Croatian Catholic priest who was a close friend of Pavelic's and who during World War II provided the link between the Vatican and the Ustachi-controlled Croatian government.

As secretary of St. Jerome's College, Rev. Draganovic headed the refugee commission established in Italy after the war for Croatians fleeing Tito's communist Yugoslavia.

Interviewed by Army Intelligence officers about his activities with Croatian refugees, Draganovic denied that he was involved in the illegal smuggling of suspected war criminals. But a search of his files, which were procured by the Army in September 1947, indicated otherwise, according to the reports.

An Army report stated that Draganovic's files "indicate clearly his involvement in aiding and abetting" Ustachi members to escape to South America. The files included the names of 20 "Ustachi war criminals," including Pavelic, who was then being housed in St. Jerome's, as well as the names of 115 other Croatian nationals who had expressed a desire to emigrate to Argentina.

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"It is very possible that this list of individuals have already shipped to the Argentine and it must be assumed that in the majority they are . . . Ustachi personalities with aliases," wrote a Counter Intelligence special agent, Robert C. Mudd, in September 1947.

The records also show the extraordinary steps taken inside one of the buildings at St. Jerome's College to keep Pavelic hidden from the Allies.

One document, based on information that a Vatican source provided the Army, said that Pavelic, disguised as a former Hungarian general, was hiding out during the summer of 1947 in a maze of rooms on the second floor of the building at 17C Via Giacomo Venetian, which was described as church property.

"If you knock once or twice at door No. 3 an unimportant person will come out," the report states. "But if you knock three times at door No. 3, door No. 2 will open. It leads to the room where Pavelic lives, together with the famous Bulgarian terrorist Vancia Mikoiloff and two other persons.

"When Pavelic leaves the building, the report added, "he uses a car with a Vatican number plate."

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